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Markets, Globalization & Development Review



Fixing Social Media: Toward a Democratic Digital Commons

As COVID-19 shuttered people into their homes, use of social media has surged (Statt 2020). Unfortunately, since US-based corporations have colonized the internet, the world's people were forced to interact inside a handful of transnational, profit-seeking panoptic networks. The pitfalls of centralized social media giants – surveillance, censorship, corporate domination – were well understood from the very beginning by critics in the Free Software movement (e.g., Smarr et al. 2007, Prodrômou 2008, 2009, Yeung et al. 2008, Moglen 2010) as well as somewhat later by other intellectuals (e.g., Foster and McChesney 2014, Masnick 2015, Zuboff 2015, Vaidyanathan 2019); and eventually by major news media outlets (NYT 2020). Their insight followed from decades of activism, in which the Free Software movement took up the issue of tech rights, at the frontlines. These hacktivists built a free and open source 'digital commons' to counter corporate power and intellectual property, and developed a critique of technology and power in society (as a related example, see ideas of 'platform cooperativism', Scholz 2016).

By now, many voices oppose Big Tech, from Fox News conservatives to *New York Times* centrists. It has become as meaningless to criticize tech giants as it is to deride Wall Street or Big Pharma. Facebook has become a punching bag for liberals and conservatives alike. The critiques in the major media came to this conversation from various intellectual and experiential roots. It took the mainstream media nearly a decade to wake up to the immense power of Big Tech. In the conversation of tech, political agendas are revealed not by platitudes about surveillance and dystopia, but by the lenses through which people interpret the root causes of why Big Tech is so dominant in the first place, and what to do about it.

As we will see below, the Free Software community has formulated the most democratic and practical alternative: a digital commons solution rooted in libertarian socialist principles of self-governance, decentralization, and federation (Kwet 2019a, Shannon et al. 2012). As a proof of concept, they have built a real-world alternative social media landscape, embodied by decentralized social networks in the Fediverse and emerging peer-to-peer solutions like LibreSocial.

Before I explain what these are, how they work – and why people should know about them, try them, and care – we have to first understand why they are not well-known, despite the fact that Fediverse networks like Mastodon have over 4 million registered users.

The end goal is to transform social media into a ‘global commons’ that is owned, controlled, and governed directly by the people. For mainstream intellectuals, this idea is still too radical to fathom. Instead, they reason, we must accept our corporate overlords and digital capitalism, in a regulated form. The “respected” commentators in the conversation are those who are trying to re-create “progressive capitalism” as the antidote to neoliberalism.

At the liberal end of the spectrum, a group of antitrust scholars called the neo-Brandeisians, joined by politicians like Elizabeth Warren, have proposed an alleged solution for social media: break up the companies and impose reforms to promote market competition. It will not work, as it leaves the corporate-owned, capitalist-oriented model of social networking intact. The neo-Brandeisian and digital socialist alternatives are animated by very different – and distinct – understandings of technology, power, and politics. Let us consider each in turn.

The Neo-Brandeisian Solution

In the past few years, a new group of antitrust scholars channeled the philosophy of Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (associate justice from 1916 to 1939) to challenge how antitrust should work in the internet era. As they note, in the 1970s, the Chicago School of legal scholars narrowed the scope of antitrust from concerns about *centralized private power* and the well-being of *society* to concerns about the *price* paid by consumers as a measure of *consumer welfare* (for an overview, see Kahn 2017). Such a narrow view is especially inadequate for the digital economy, where many Big Tech products and services are anticompetitive and harmful, despite the ‘zero price’ (at least in terms of subscriptions) paid by consumers for access.

For social media, most of the neo-Brandeisians hold that Facebook is harmful because it can use monopolistic power to erode our privacy, restrict consumer choice and innovation, undermine traditional media, and manipulate the behavior of users (Lynn and Stoller 2018, Patel 2018). The solution, they argue, is twofold: First, break up companies into component parts as a part of structural separation, and then force social networks to interoperate. Facebook, for example, concentrated its market power by acquiring Instagram and WhatsApp. Why not break it up into three separate companies? Most recognize that this in and of itself has its limitations, as there would still only be a few additional companies on the market performing the same functions. A second solution, neo-Brandeisians argue, is to force social networks to interoperate.

Telephony and email can help us understand how this works. Imagine a telephone network owned and controlled by the “Red” corporation. Red owns the wires and phones, and only Red phone users can call other people using Red phones. The more people start using a Red phone, the more valuable the Red phone becomes (a dynamic called “network effects”; see Johnson n.d.). If a Green Phone enters the market, the use of such a phone can only call other Green phone users. If 90% of someone’s friends are already Red phone users, that person will probably buy a Red Phone. At best, one or two other companies will be able to offer something different, because nobody would want more than a few phones. However, if a Red phone can call a Green phone, then one can get whatever color phone one wants and still talk to the entire network of friends. Email works like this as well: a ProtonMail user can email a Yahoo email user, because they interoperate over a shared communications protocol (set of procedures for communicating).

Social media networks are like Red and Green phones: they are isolated networks that choose not to interoperate with competitors (settings that are dubbed “walled gardens,” see Best 2014). As a result, users are all stuck in a few networks: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. There is little room for new competitors to enter the market, and little choice for consumers.

Neo-Brandeisians claim that the end goal of social media antitrust should be to create competition. If there were just more social networks – imagine ten or twenty social networks – then platforms like Facebook would be unable to keep people from leaving if they violate their privacy or manipulate them. Market forces will impose accountability, and consumers will be saved.

A Skeptical View of the Neo-Brandeisian Perspective

Creating multiple, competing social media platforms sounds nice until one starts thinking about how digital capitalism works. For starters, in order to turn profits, a corporation needs to generate revenue. One way to do this is to spy on users and monetize their data for marketing such as through personalized ads. People generally do not like surveillance or ads, so the corporations owning the platform have to force it on them. Ads can only be imposed on people because social media networks own and control the infrastructure, which they run as centralized networks on their corporate clouds. Even with more competitors, each company would still own and control the infrastructure, so they can all impose an ad-based revenue model on their users.

In fact, we already see this in the app marketplace. Seventy percent of the apps in the two most popular app stores, Google Play and Apple iOS, have hidden app trackers that spy on users (Vallina-Rodriguez et al. 2016, O'Brien and Kwet 2018). There are millions of apps, yet “competition” does not stop apps from spying on users. In fact, apps *compete* to spy on users, and users cannot do anything about it except stop using their beloved apps, because these are proprietary software applications that cannot be controlled by the users. There is no reason to assume competition among profit-seeking social networks will end differently.

A second possibility within the neo-Brandeisian framework is to charge users to access their services. Paid networks would then offer people a service that pledges to protect their privacy such as no data monetization. The “pay-for-privacy” option, however, is ethically flawed. Most of the world’s people have little or no disposable income (Hickel 2019). Poor people would be forced to use “free” surveillance-based networks, while the wealthy would pay to preserve their privacy.

To fix this problem, one might advocate serving users ads without exploiting their data for personalization. This, too, is problematic. Most ads are involuntary corporate propaganda designed to manipulate people into buying more stuff. Bombarding people with ads all day pushes an environmentally destructive consumerist lifestyle on the world precisely at the time when we need to scale back overconsumption in rich countries and produce things that are needed in poorer countries, in order to transition to a sustainable and egalitarian global economy.

The real problem is we want a free and equitable social networking experience that respects privacy, provides the desired experience of users, and supports democracy; but we cannot deliver it in a capitalist system. A capitalist social network is enticed to profit and grow, which cannot be achieved without user exploitation or the generation of inequality. Indeed, business strategy scholars as well as political analysts understand it all too well – the prevailing conditions favor winner-take-all models (Hill 1997).

Digital Socialism: A Commons-based Socialist Solution

As was understood at the outset, to fix the social media, we need to socialize the architecture around principles of commons-based ownership, self-governance, and decentralization. Fortunately, we have an existing starting point with the Fediverse, a decentralized social media ecosystem already used by millions of users.

The Fediverse is a collection of interoperable social media networks where users can interact across multiple social networks. Its designers aim to distribute power and control to end users instead of centralized intermediaries. Fediverse development began circa 2008 in the Free Software community. In the past few years, it reached a polished, functional, and visually appealing form. The most popular network is Mastodon, a Twitter-like microblogging service with about four million registered users. Other services include PeerTube for video sharing, akin to YouTube and PixelFed for photo sharing, akin to Instagram.

The best way to understand a social network like Mastodon is to open an account and start using it, but some of its core features are explained next. In Mastodon, a user can join a server called an “instance” that hosts the user data and sets its own policies. If users do not like the instances out there, then they can create own instances and set their own policies. All instances must in some way pay to host and transmit the data. Some instances are free to the public, while others charge users a small fee. Once someone joins an instance, they create a username and password. The social media handle then becomes a combination of the username and instance. For example, @user@instance.xyz. In Twitter and Facebook, users are provided with just one newsfeed. In Mastodon, one can choose from *three*: the user’s “home timeline” (posts of who the user chooses to follow), the “local timeline” (posts by the others in the user’s instance), and a “federated timeline” (posts by users from *outside* instances that the people in the *local* instance follow). Each instance sets its own code of conduct. An instance could promote general conversation, or it could be focused on topics like puppies or politics. Each instance sets its own content policies, so they can prohibit things like pornography, harassment, prejudice, and gore. Individual users and instance moderators can filter content by muting or blocking other users or instances. The system is decentralized, so there is no central actor collecting all user data or setting the code of conduct for all Mastodon users.

In one prominent example, a social network called Gab – which many consider a haven for ultra-right extremists and fascists – migrated its community to Mastodon. Because Mastodon has content moderation tools that allow communities to block out entire instances, those who do not want to associate with Gab users were able to block the Gab instance. While there were worries that Gab may ruin the Fediverse (Makuch 2019), the broader community has successfully contained the issue to date (Robertson 2019).

The Fediverse also offers avenues for different *kinds* of social networking experiences. For example, a computer programmer, Darius Kazemi, created a Mastodon fork called Friend Camp that is designed for small, tightly-knit communities (Kazemi 2019). This allowed Friend Camp users to make local-only posts that are ideal for conversations between users of a single instance. These kinds of user-created customizations are made possible by Free Software licenses (so people can modify how the interface works), interoperability (so people can have different experiences but still interact with the broader social networking world), and affordable hardware (the network architecture to store and route user data).

There are two additional features that help democratize the decentralized social networking ecosystem. The first is broad-based interoperability: a user on one social networking platform can interact with a user on another platform, as long as both platforms implement the same communications protocol. For example, a user in Mastodon can follow a user in PeerTube without having to join PeerTube, because both Mastodon and PeerTube use the ActivityPub protocol. This enables interaction across platforms: a Mastodon user can comment under the post of a PeerTube video without leaving Mastodon (and vice-versa). It also helps keep the platforms from dominating their users: Mastodon users could leave Mastodon for PeerTube and still talk to their Mastodon friends. On Facebook, by contrast, users who desert Facebook would have to get all of their Facebook friends to leave with them, to be able to continue to talk to them.

A second feature is the open sourcing of the software stack. The server software determines many of the features a user can experience, and by licensing the server software under a Free Software license such as the AGPL (Affero General Public License), the public can modify how the Mastodon platform works. This opens the door to innovation, as the public can take the Mastodon source code and create a Mastodon-like platform with new and different features. Free Software licensing also constrains the power of Mastodon to exploit the community. For example, Mastodon is ad-free, and if it tried to build banner ads into the platform, the community could take the code and run their own ad-free version. In addition, because the protocols and Application Programming Interfaces, or APIs, are also open, any member of the public can add their own network to the Fediverse.

One flaw in the current Fediverse model is that it places data ownership and administrative control in the hands of the instance owners. One way to mitigate against this is to have each person self-host their own network on personal cloud architecture like FreedomBox. Essentially, each

household would become a client and a server hosting data and routing traffic. User groups could still be created so that people could form new networks and collectively moderate content.

A technically harder, but perhaps more desirable solution, is to further decentralize the underlying architecture on a peer-to-peer model (Graffi and Masinde 2020). A social network, LibreSocial, is being developed to do just this. This network reserves a portion of each user's hard drive for the network, and then users store and route each other's information collectively across devices. The data is encrypted so that only users who have permission to read a post – say, someone's "friend" – have access to the data. Post marked 'public' are available to all. The LibreSocial network also features plug-ins which can customize graphical interfaces that display the social media data. Programmers can also develop games, video conferencing, calendars, and other features for the users on the network (Masinde and Graffi 2020).

Building a Movement for Digital Socialism

In order to transform the social media ecosystem into a 'democratic commons', we need supportive government policies. A free and open sourced, decentralized ecosystem is the most thorough and democratic solution that can break up Big Social Media and transform it into democratic commons. We also need stronger privacy laws than we have seen to date, such as laws that require users to opt into data processing for marketing purposes without restricting their access to the service(s) offered.

Taxes can help subsidize "infrastructure-as-a-public-service" to develop and maintain software and fund equitable access to hardware and broadband connectivity. Tech giants can help foot the bill, and resources could be extended to people in the Global South as reparations for slavery and colonialism, including recent revenue extraction from digital colonialism (Kwet 2019b; Kwet 2020a). Schools can also play a role by educating students and replacing proprietary and centralized cloud services with Free Software and decentralized services.

Of course, this will not be gifted from above. The neo-Brandeisians have never even mentioned Free Software or Fediverse networks in their solutions – even though the Fediverse offers the one and only substantial set of interoperable social networks today – because they operate at a distance in a reformist network wedded to power. If we leave the tech solutions to elite legal academics and to the Congress, they may push for "pro-market" bills like the ACCESS Act, which only mandates interoperability among commercial communications platforms hosting 100

million or more users. The bill leaves the fundamental problem, the exploitative aspects of digital capitalism, untouched and unsolved.

We need instead a People's Tech movement to replace Big Social Media with democratic commons (Kwet 2020b). Just as we cannot fix the environment with "clean coal," "all of the above" dirty energy solutions, or cap-and-trade market-based reforms, we cannot fix social media with new corporate owners, proprietary software, centralized cloud computing, and market competition. The master's tools cannot be employed to dismantle the master's house. We have to push back against both Silicon Valley *and* techlash "critics" who promote corporate capitalism and internalize tech hegemony (Kwet 2019b). Very likely, people will need to forge a global Digital Tech New Deal that dovetails with a Green New Deal (Kwet, 2020a). Activists and the youth are prime candidates to lead this struggle, and will need to forge connections with digital rights lawyers and solidarity movements across the world.

Digital socialism is necessary to fix social media. The building blocks are there, but a popular movement is needed to see it through. Some authors at MGDR have begun to question the 'unfree' and 'controlled' nature of digital platforms (Ozgun 2018, and articles in that MGDR special issue). It is hoped that this Dialogue essay, and other such efforts, would help build the movement towards a transition to shared, equitable, non-exploitative social media as well as other platforms.

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